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Trump, Immigration, and Children

Council on Anthropology and Education

Ted Hamann

June 12, 2017

Disrupted Schooling, Disrupted Lives



The author (farthest right) visiting a school in Morelos, México 2013, interviewing teachers, students, and parents regarding the negotiation of schooling in two countries. Ted Hamann

Since President Trump took office, immigrant arrests are up over 32 percent compared to the same time period last year ([Washington Post](#)). While the number of deportations is down slightly (likely due to court backlogs), unlike his predecessor President Obama, who focused on arresting and deporting violent criminals and anyone posing a national security threat, under Trump ICE has cast a wider net to include the arrest of non-criminals. Many of us work with immigrant communities and are witnessing firsthand the fear, frustration, and heartache caused by Trump's immigration policies. Yet despite our years of work with, and study of, immigrant communities, there are times when our academic expertise is not enough. What follows is a reflection by CAE member Ted Hamann on just such a

situation he faced this spring when asked for help in assisting two US-born students that were about to accompany their soon-to-be deported parents to Mexico.

On April 11, I received the email below from an old friend, a former Spanish teacher turned middle school counselor:

Hi Ted,

Say, I have a 6th grade student, US born, whose parents are being deported to Mexico next week and she is going with them. I know that you had worked with an institution in Monterrey on a project

involving cross-country immigration. I'm wondering if you have any tips for this student who is essentially immigrating to a foreign country. She wants to take some books so she won't forget her English. I assume she'll be behind the Mexican students academically and may face teasing because of her accent. In the past US born students have reported not being accepted by peers—too "gringa." Do you have any thoughts or advice? The little girl is leaving on Friday. I have another 6th grade girl whose dad was apprehended by ICE; it was a big mess and the incident rippled throughout the [school district's] Hispanic community.

Hope all is well with you...

Thanks,

Kayla Steiger

I was pleased Kayla reached out to me and pleased that she remembered my work with colleagues in Monterrey, Mexico with whom I have collaborated for 15 years to study the growing and changing phenomenon of children coming to Mexican schools with prior experience in the US (see [Hamann et al. 2006](#) and [Zúñiga and Hamann 2015](#)). But her question wasn't about whether I could send an article; rather, it was about whether I could offer any help. That, of course opens a huge question—What exactly would constitute help for Maria de la Luz, her younger brother Norberto, and their parents? What tangible help can anthropologists of education offer the vulnerable who they encounter?

Maria de la Luz and her brother are now like hundreds of thousands of children in Mexican schools who have spent part or all of their lives in US schools. Based on data collected through school surveys and site visits in four Mexican states (Nuevo León, Zacatecas, Puebla, and Jalisco) and then comparing that to county-level (*municipio*-level) international migration rates collected by the Mexican Census, we estimated that in 2010 there were more than 300,000 US-born students in Mexican schools and more than 420,000 with US school experience (Zúñiga and Hamann 2015). Reiterating this point, the United Nations' [International Migration Report 2015](#) found that 98% of Mexico's 1.2 million foreign-born residents were born in the US and their median age was just 15.

Mexican schools are growing in their awareness of students like Maria de la Luz and her brother. The [Programa Binacional de Educación Migrante](#) (PROBEM) and the previous *Educación sin Fronteras* initiative (which ended in 2012 with Mexico's change of presidents) both have included teacher professional development activities and curriculum development. However, the worries in Kayla's email are not unfounded. Most Mexican teachers do not feel ready to work with students with lots

of US school experience. The tapping of such students' background knowledge in more profound ways than assisting with pronunciation of a term in English (and the like) is rare (see [Sánchez García and Hamann 2016](#)). Mexico is no more ready for students coming from the US (even if they have cultural and sometimes even birthplace links to Mexico) than are US schools ready for those coming from Latin America. Indeed, absent programs like "Spanish as a Second Language" or other newcomer accommodating mechanisms, in important ways, are less ready.

In 15 years I've learned a lot about the schooling of transnationally mobile children in Mexican schools, but I wish I'd learned more about how to support children in situations like Maria de la Luz.

Yet the point of this column is not mainly to describe what I know and have learned from years of looking at transnationally mobile students and families on both sides of the US/Mexico border. That's background. Rather, what I want to concede is that, confronted with real children whose lives were being uprooted because of the current US administration's intolerant and unjust enforcement of immigration policy, I tried to be helpful, but I'm not sure that I was. I did meet with both Maria de la Luz and Kayla, ascertained various facts (like that the next day would be María de la Luz's first time on an airplane), and tried to offer cheerful points, like that she could finally meet her grandmother in person. I passed on names and Mexican cell phone numbers of two colleagues who were working in Puebla who prospectively could help her settle into her new school. I wrote a note (in Spanish) to her mother offering my aid. But in the month since, I haven't yet heard anything from Maria de la Luz or her parents. I do know that they have been in touch with Kayla and others at the middle school, confirming their arrival in Mexico. They sent an address that English books could be sent to, but added that it might soon change as they look for a longer-term housing arrangement.

In 15 years I've learned a lot about the schooling of transnationally mobile children in Mexican schools, but I wish I'd learned more about how to support children in situations like Maria de la Luz. What I know did not stop the brutal choice of either dividing children from their parents so that a US citizen could stay at a US school or (as happened) sending that child and her brother to a system where the language of instruction was not one she had ever studied academically and where norms and expectations differed from what she knew. What I know did not prevent the multiple shocks of relocation, parent stress, and economic uncertainty (all of which can hurt school success) from being visited on Maria de Luz and her brother. Maybe they will be resilient—we can hope—but it feels vexing to know so much and yet feel capable of helping so little.

Edmund 'Ted' Hamann is a professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning, & Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He has been a member of AAA and CAE since 1993 and AAA Treasurer since 2012. He is (co)author/editor of *Revisiting Education in the New Latino Diaspora* and *Alumnos transnacionales: Las escuelas mexicanas frente a la globalización*, among many other publications, and was recognized with the AAA Anthropology in Public Policy award in 2015 for his work related to the schooling and transnationally mobile students and families.

Cathy Amanti and **Patricia D. López** are contributing editors for the Council on Anthropology and Education's news column. If you would like to contribute, contact us at camanti@gsu.edu and/or patricia.d.lopez@sjsu.edu.

Note: Names are pseudonyms.

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